



REVISITING THE GAPS: ELEMENTS OF HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION IN BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S THE LACUNA

R. Annalakshmi¹, Dr. V. Ponmari²

¹ Research Scholar, PG & Research Department of English, Sri Meenakshi Govt. Arts College for Women (A), Madurai. Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University.

² Assistant Professor of English, PG & Research Department of English, Sri Meenakshi Govt. Arts College for Women(A), Madurai. Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University.

ABSTRACT

With the rise of postmodern literature like historiographic metafiction, novelists have challenged traditional historicism while problematising historical justification for past injustice. Kingsolver uses postmodern literary devices in *The Lacuna* presenting her novel as a work of historiographic metafiction. The political and historical context in which Kingsolver uses such literary devices reveals the novel's historiographic metafictional qualities. It self reflexively evokes a reconsideration of the historical accounts. The aim of this paper is to analyze the way Kingsolver uses history in the novel. In order to make use of such analysis, this paper will make use of the critical lens of Linda Hutcheon's *Historiographic Metafiction*. In line with Hutcheon's argumentations, this study claims that through metafictional qualities *The Lacuna* deconstructs all the techniques and the methods on which traditional historiography builds itself.

KEYWORDS: Historiographic Metafiction, Self reflexive, Traditional Historiography, Intertextuality.

INTRODUCTION

Literature and history are closely related. Considering the history of literature, history itself has influenced countless pieces of script. The main connection between literature and history is that the latter posits itself as fact while the former is taken to be an artistic form. In discovering the history of race, feelings, aspirations, customs and traditions of the people are surely to be included and written in literature.

The deep connection between history and literature varies according to the literary period, from the medieval period to the postmodern period. Every literary period has its own set of understanding of things and distinct way of interpretations. To decode all those literary nuances which are brought out by the writers and the already existing history of the literary text becomes the core of its objective. A text can have many implications, so every text is supposed to be studied by going deep into its literary uniqueness, relevant past and already established fundamental assumptions.

The presence of the past is one of the shades embedded in the postmodern era. With the advent of postmodern thought, history writing took a different turn. In 19th century historiography, the study of the writing process of history emerged as an academic discipline. Philosophers and literary critics like Hayden White and Linda Hutcheon appealed to the role of historiography in the constitution of historical facts. The narrative structure of traditional history is fore grounded to show the fictionality of traditional historical works. In addition, historical novels take a new form and they are different from the novels which are written in the previous years. In this way, it is found that the historical figures, situations and archives are inserted in the historical novel.

Linda Hutcheon, Canadian scholar and literary critic produces a new tendency in postmodern historical fiction. Linda opines, "The term postmodernism when used in fiction, should by analogy, best be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past" (Hutcheon 3). Historiographic Metafiction incorporates all three domains - literature, history and theory. It consists of self conscious fiction concerned with historiography. It questions how we know about the past, which version we know and who told and what they told us; then it invites us to consider the possible motivation of a particular version of the past. Linda puts about that:

What the postmodern writing both of history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past "exertions of the shaping, ordering imaginations" (Hutcheon 89)

One can easily conclude that 'history' would have to refer to actual events that occurred in the past while fiction describes events constructed in the writer's imagination. Reading a history book always comes with the potential bias as we don't know the accuracy that the book has to provide. However, historiography is not only the concept, rather, it perpetuates with the idea of metafiction. Metafiction, on the other hand, is a type of writing where the book itself adheres

to the device of fiction. Historiographic metafiction can be of various categories: it may be a work of fiction within fiction, non-linear novel or a novel about the writing of another novel.

In this context, *The Lacuna* by Barbara Kingsolver provides all the attributes of a historiographical metafiction. *The Lacuna* exposes history to be narrative discourse similar to fiction where historians, just like storytellers "decide which events will become facts" (Hutcheon 122), revealing to us in the elusive forms of diaries and memoirs, letters and presscutting. *The Lacuna* is a deliberate attempt to unveil other realities and rewrite history.

Kingsolver skillfully weaves the tumultuous events that rocked two countries, the United States and Mexico. Kingsolver explores the link between the historical events and individual lives. *The Lacuna* probes into the source of the historical relationship between art and politics in the United States as well as the gap between a life lived and life reported.

This paper, however, will only look at the novel in terms of its handling of history writing. It analyzes the way *The Lacuna* uses history and its presentation. In order to make analysis the paper will make use of seminal work of Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988) in which she illustrates the properties of 'historiographic metafiction' - a category encompassing the postmodern novel whose basic motivation is to question the paradigms of traditional historiography.

Before moving into the analysis of the novel in terms of historiographic metafiction, it would be useful to provide a synopsis of the novel. Barbara Kingsolver's *The Lacuna* is a novel concerned with the life of Harrison Shepherd, an introvert who prefers to slip into the background and record events rather than be a part of them.

Harrison was born in 1917 in the U.S, to an American father and a Mexican mother who doesn't view marriage as permanent. Harrison leads an almost completely directionless life: his mother pays him barely any attention. One day, Harrison has a stroke of incredible luck when he is sent on a series of errands and ends up running into the artist Frida Kahlo in Mexico City marketplace. She is already famous and married to the equally famous mural artist Diego Rivera. At the same time, Harrison got a job at Kahlo - Rivera household as a plasterer and as a cook. Harrison finds himself drawn to the history, culture and art of the Aztecs. In 1937, the household welcomed the former Soviet Leader and now a dissident hunted by Stalin - Leon Trotsky, after Kahlo - Rivera successfully petitioned the Mexican government to grant him asylum. Harrison's duties now include being Trotsky's secretary, putting himself at a tremendous risk and entering the world of revolutionaries. In 1940, Trotsky was assassinated. At this point, young adult Harrison returned to America and reconnected with his father, where his interest in writing was nurtured and brought out more fully.

The novel takes a new form as Harrison starts narrating his life from a first person point of view. Harrison is working as a novelist in Asheville, North Carolina. He also forms a close working relationship with Violet Brown, his emphatic and

pragmatic secretary. Because of his past association with the communist Trotsky and his ongoing friendship with Kahlo, Harrison was investigated by the house Un-American Activities Committee. Harrison is thrown by the intrusive prosecutorial nature of investigation. He decides to return to Mexico, instructs Violet to burn all of his papers and spends the rest of his life in seclusion. After his death, it is revealed that Violet has actually saved all of Harrison's diaries and letters, and it is from this material that she has assembled the novel.

Although the book outlines the life of the fictional writer Harrison Shepherd, such a life provides the lens through which a profound historical transition might be observed. Shepherd came of age in the 1930s in Mexico at a time of political and artistic ferment. It is no coincidence that Shepherd's stay with the Riveras also takes place at the period of time that exiled revolutionary Leon - Trotsky, spent in their household before his murder at the hands of stalinist assassin. This period becomes the focal point around which the more panoramic horror of humanity's slip into a second global war arrayed.

In *The Lacuna*, Kingsolver beautifully weaves the experience of fictional loner (Shepherd) merged with those of the larger-than-life figures like Trotsky who played a pivotal role in world politics. Shepherd's notebook to dredge up not only the perception they concealed but also a history larger than his own, touching on everything from Trotskyism, Stalinism and the Red scare to racism and the media intrusion into personal and national affairs. It justifies what Hutcheon rightly states that "Postmodernism is fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical and inescapably political" (Hutcheon 4). Kingsolver's *The Lacuna* can be enjoyed for its portrait of real and invented people but the value of Kingsolver's novel lies in it called to conscience and connection. Kingsolver has mined shepherd richly imagined history to create a living picture of epochs and people of that particular time. Kingsolver brings historical and imagined characters together in the 1930's and 1940s Mexico and the United States in an attempt to achieve social, political and creative freedom.

The term Lacuna refers to a gap, or a missing piece of information. But in using this literary conceit, Kingsolver has carefully woven [lot without any holes. This ambitious work bridges two continents, two cultures, two political ideologies and two tumultuous decades. Harrison's journal entries, combined with newspaper clippings and letters to Kahlo and others are marvelously brought out by the author.

Hutcheon states in historiographic metafiction, the distinction between historical and fiction is blurred. She claims that history and fiction, previously regarded as different genres shared common ground in claiming the truth:

Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or commonsense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity (Hutcheon 93)

The discourses of the fictional and factual intermingle to foreground the constructed of both genres; one of the apparent ways of problematizing the distinction between historical fact and fiction is the existence of historical figures in *The Lacuna*. The most significant instance is the communist leader Leon Trotsky visiting Diego Rivera's house in Mexico. But the presence of historical figures is not in accordance with official history, especially newspaper clippings, letters, diary entries. Kingsolver self consciously states in the "A note on Historical Reference" in *The Lacuna* the historical figures include fictional elements:

Historical persons portrayed and quoted from the historical record, but their conversations with the character Harrison Shepherd are entirely invented. This is a work of fiction. (The Lacuna ii)

Although Kingsolver claims that historical figures, letters, newspaper clippings are fictional and untrue, there are still many similarities with the actual life story of historical figures and historical documents. The reader is not able to make a clear cut distinction between two seemingly separate ways of knowledge.

Another apparent instance of mixing reality with fiction shows itself in the way diary entries, snippets and letters are used. Conventionally, diary entries, newsletter is not expected to be used in creative writings; this is rather a practice of historiography. However, Violet Brown's Archivist's note, Newsletter clippings used to give extra information about the text. The existence of these letters, memoirs creates the impression in the reader's mind that these are factual writing but at the same time the reader also realizes that these are partly fictional because historically Trotsky did not have a typist named Harrison Shepherd. In this way the boundary between fact and fiction is blurred. This implication disturbs the traditional distinction between fact and fiction.

Hutcheon add on, that postmodernism attempts to emphasize that the past is only known via texts which are human constructs. Contrary to the truth claims of traditional mainstream historians in representing the past as it actually was, postmodern writers are of the opinion that the past is a construct since the past

appears only as text. The evidence which is assumed to be the most significant element that distinguishes history from fiction is treated as text. Traditional understanding of reference is that "what history refers to is the actual real world; what fiction refers to is a fictive universe" (Hutcheon 142). In historiographic metafiction, instead of referring to observable and physical reality, historical facts and figures are solely textual products and the only reference they can make to the other text. Thus, the vaunted status of evidence strengthening the illusion of reality in traditional historiography is shattered in historiographic metafiction. In *The Lacuna* the penalty for the charges against Trotsky is death:

the charges are strange and diverse : derailing train, acting as agent, stealing bread, attempting to assassinate Stalin by poisoning his shoes... yet he seems in good spirits, despite the newspaper from France and the United States calling him a villain and the Mexican ones calling him a villain in our midst (The Lacuna 156)

Though Trotsky is constantly on edge and prepared for his own, inevitable assassination, despite his chaotic life, he remains faithful to his belief and has a quiet and powerful personality. Trotsky is deeply admired by fictional character Harrison Shepherd. Hence the illusion of Trotsky in traditional historiography is shattered in *The Lacuna*. Harrison admired and favored Trotsky "No barefoot soldiers want to kill him anymore after hearing his fiery defense of the worker and peasant reported in the news" (The Lacuna 164). In the novel, Trotsky is admired for his spirits not hated by anyone. In real, Trotsky oppose Stalin and not in good spirits considered as villain but in the story almost all the characters admired Trotsky and his speech.

The self reflexively intertextual nature of *The Lacuna* is another metafictional strategy that enhances the novel's relation to historiographic metafiction. Of course, traditional historical fiction is also intertextual because it relies on other texts, such as historical documents, interviews and historical artifacts. However, traditional historical fiction conceals this fact. *The Lacuna* emphasizes the intertextual aspect of historical fiction. In the novel, Kingsolver overly makes use of other text like the articles and excerpts from the New York Times as originally published. The letters, historical events and people have factual basis to a certain extent contrary to what is claimed in the s author's note that "This is a work of fiction" (The Lacuna ii). Yet, that these texts are fictional is also true, for they also contain imaginary sections that are not found in the actual documents. Thus, they have fictional and factual aspects.

Another aspect of self-reflexivity in metafiction is narrative device that enables showing awareness of itself, that it is marked by the return of its discourse towards itself. As an example, there is a passage in the novel, where author reminds us that Harrison Shepherd is a character within the novel: "These pages record the early life of Harrison William Shepherd a citizen of the United States born in 1916, Virginia (The Lacuna 29). Another good example of metafiction in the novel is when the author identifies the story within a story; the death of Harrison Shepherd is as something outside the text: "most important part of the story is the piece of it you don't know" (The Lacuna 494). The metafictional device, thus contributes to its own understanding as a artifact and it uses this self awareness about its own nature in order to pose questions about the dynamics that link the real and the fictional.

To add on to the previous note, since history can be seen as a construct, it can be seen to represent only one voice, the voices of the ones in power, whereas fiction, representing the arts, has the power to challenge this unique voice and give space to multiple voices. In order to demonstrate that the official records are constructs, Kingsolver through the character of Kahlo views about the past, "Well, nobody knows how they were, so you can make up anything you want...A story like painting, Soli', It doesn't have to look like. What you see out of the window" (The Lacuna 197). The novel then raises the flag for the importance of art and its role in challenging official history and opening a way to show other truths, other perspectives beyond the official discourse. Kingsolver writes that "an artist has to tell the truth...you have to use the craft very well and have a lot of discipline for it, but mostly to be a good artist you have to know something that's true" (The Lacuna 199) suggesting that art has the power to betray history and reveals the evils that official history can hide.

It can be seen from the above analysis, that *The Lacuna* gives evidence to the reader that history and memory of the past is cardinal in historiographic metafiction. Kingsolver has captured the historical moments where one lives through, with its perplexity and uncertainty. Thus *The Lacuna* sometimes overtly and sometimes covertly makes use of historical and fictional text. It is not just that the events are similar to other texts; it is also the properties of many characters that share common points with historical figures. Kingsolver has never written a novel for her readers, instead she has revisited that part in the history. She has excellently exhibited the technique of historiographic meta-writing in her novel.

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